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November 2, 1880.

Vol. VII.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

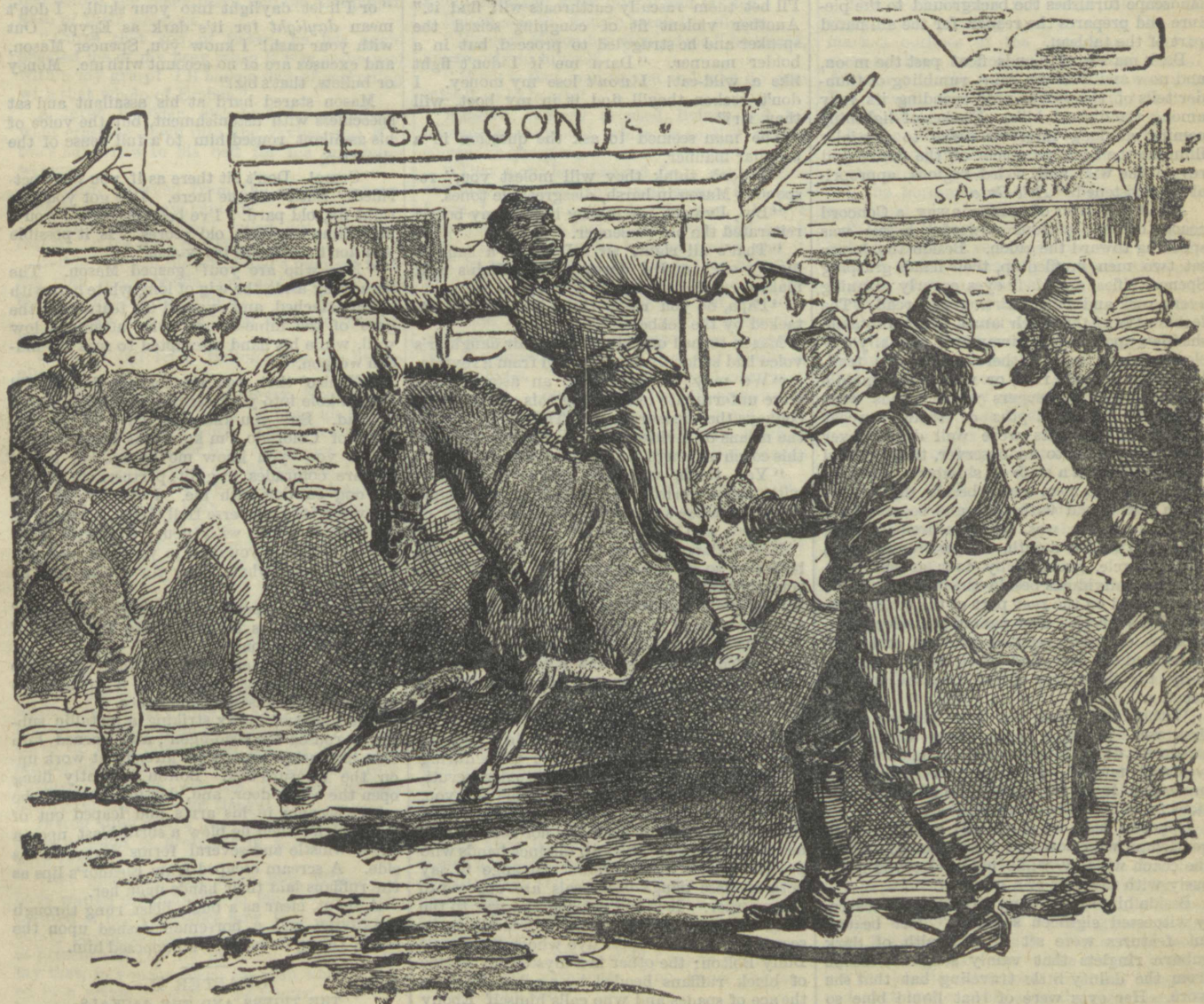
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No. 171.

EBONY DAN: or, THE RIVAL LEAGUES OF SILVER CIRCLE.

BY FRANK DUMONT,

AUTHOR OF "WIDE AWAKE," "THE BRANDED HAND," "WILD-FIRE," "BLUE BLAZES," "MARKED FOR LIFE," ETC.



THE NEGRO SAT ERECT IN THE SADDLE AND WITH HIS WEAPONS BLAZED AWAY AT EVERY ONE WHO SOUGHT TO INTERCEPT HIM IN HIS FLIGHT.

Ebony Dan;

OR,

The Rival Leagues of Silver Circle.

A Romance of Wild Life in the Mines.

BY FRANK DUMONT,

AUTHOR OF "WIDE AWAKE," "THE BRANDED HAND," "WILD-FIRE," "BLUE BLAZES," "EVIL EYE," "MARKED FOR LIFE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN INCIDENT IN HELL GATE.

READER, picture to yourself a tremendous rocky gulch with towering masses of rock that rise upon either side, shutting out the light and threatening to crash down into the gloomy ravine should nature, in a restless moment, disturb the huge sentinels of granite that seem to guard this desolate spot. Imagine the winding road through this forbidding locality—a rough trail that would be gladly abandoned if some other route could be found to reach the new Eldorado christened "Silver Circle," probably twenty miles distant. Just before entering this gulch the road crosses a mountain torrent swollen into ungovernable volumes of turbid waters by the frequent rains. A rude log bridge spans the swift stream, and, a dozen rods away, the black yawning portals of the ravine loom up like the jaws of an infernal monster awaiting the coming of its victims. The wild Colorado landscape furnishes the background to the picture and prepares the reader for the animated part of the tableau.

Dark masses of clouds float past the moon, and now and then the faint rumbling of thunder tells of the storm now spending its fury among the distant hills. Flashes of lightning coming at long intervals serve to partially illumine the dark precincts of the ravine and reveal the wild and weird regions, appropriately christened "Hell Gate."

About a quarter of a mile away, a Concord coach drawn by four powerful horses was speeding toward the gulch. Beside the driver sat two men muffled up, their hands grasping Spencer rifles, and their eyes eagerly scanning every rock and bush skirting the road. The feeble rays of the coach lamps threw fantastic shadows upon the roadway and partially disclosed objects upon either side of the trail. Upon the coach's roof, or rather the middle seats, sat two passengers whose hands were ensconced in the depths of their overcoat pockets. Their hats were well drawn over their eyes, and, to an observer, they seemed to be plunged in a state of slumber. Directly behind the two men, seated beside the driver, was a box bound with iron and secured by a patent lock. It was the treasure-box that, once or twice a month, was expressed from Silver Circle, guarded by four armed men. The two individuals beside the driver and two more seated on the rear part of the coach comprised the escort. The men were selected on account of their reputed prowess and vigilance, and all four had often fought desperately for the safety of the treasure in their keeping.

Within the coach sat three persons. The first was an aged man whose white hair streamed down almost to his shoulders. He was well muffled up, but a distressing cough proceeded from his lips in spite of his precautions to exclude the damp night air.

Opposite this old man was a middle-aged gentleman who now and then glanced out of the coach window while his hand toyed nervously with the butt of a revolver.

Beside him sat a young girl who had scarcely witnessed eighteen summers. Her beautiful features were set in a wealth of dark auburn ringlets that vainly sought to escape from the dainty little traveling hat that she wore. Her eyes were of that liquid blue so often described by poets. Twin lips that seemed to be forever inviting kisses, were now

parted, disclosing teeth white and perfectly even. A cloak of dark material covered the traveling dress worn by the little lady who is to figure prominently in our story.

A passing description of the person beside her may not weary the reader but serve to portray another character who will occupy the reader's attention from time to time. The hard lines about the corners of the mouth, the quick restless eyes of a dull gray color and the cunning expression of the man's face betrays his crafty nature, stamps him a hypocrite and to the reader of faces it plainly speaks a warning.

"Look out for him," seems to be written on the man's countenance as plainly as if it had been traced there in letters instead of the many deep lines, and forbidding aspect.

Such is Spencer Mason—a man reputed to be enormously wealthy and owner of silver mines in the newly discovered regions. Eleanor Mason is his daughter, and one cannot look upon the fair girl's features and then upon Mason's and see the slightest resemblance between the two.

"We are approaching that canyon," said Mason tremulously. "I wish we were through that accursed place. The storm having spent its fury we'll probably soon have another tempest about our ears in the shape of the ruffians who infest this road."

"Dear me! Don't mention highwaymen to me," gasped the little white-haired man amid a violent fit of coughing. "I've got three thousand dollars hid away in my left boot and I'll bet them rascally cutthroats will find it." Another violent fit of coughing seized the speaker and he struggled to proceed, but in a bolder manner. "Darn me if I don't fight like a wild-cat! I won't lose my money. I don't reckon they'll find it in my boot, will they, sir?"

The man seemed to ask the question in a peculiar manner.

"I don't think they will molest you," responded Mason in harsh, disagreeable tones.

"But, I've got my money hid in my boot!" reiterated the old passenger.

"That's all right, sir. I carry a sum of money also, and I daresay the villains will make a careful search for it," replied Mason.

"Papa, do you really think we shall be attacked by the robbers?"

Mason turned quickly as if his fair daughter's voice had suddenly recalled him from a reverie.

"We may be subject to an attack! We were unfortunate in selecting this coach, for it conveys the treasure-box. The chest will be the means of inviting the road-agents to stop this coach although we carry an armed escort."

"Yes, that's so! The guards are armed with rifles," cried the coughing passenger; "besides, there's two travelers on the top of the coach, and you—and I."

Mason glanced out of the window as though he feared to see the forms of the banditti surrounding the vehicle. Every jolt of the lumbering coach caused him to start and betray the true state of his feelings.

"May be, the robbers are not such rascals as to trouble us because the lady is within the coach," suggested the aged wayfarer after a short series of coughs.

"You seem to be a stranger," growled Mason, eying the old gentleman in a peculiar manner. In fact it was the first time during the journey that Mason had actually scrutinized his fellow traveler. "Let me tell you, sir, that this trail is infested with gangs of cutthroats who spare neither age nor sex. There are at the present time two distinct bands who pretend to rule these regions. Strange to say both of these gangs of rascals are opposed to one another. It is dog eat dog and war to the knife between them. One is headed by a scoundrel of the deepest dye who calls himself Bully Bolton; the other is a mysterious league of black ruffians headed by a negro black as the ace of spades and who calls himself Ebony Dan."

Crack! The sharp report of a rifle rung

through the defile, just as the coach rolled into the gloomy avenue, and exactly as Mason uttered the name of the road-agent.

It seemed as if the very name had been the cue for the startling incidents that followed each other simultaneously. Quick upon the flash of the rifle from the roadside the two passengers upon the coach withdrew their hands from their pockets. Each man held a brace of pistols within his grasp. One man leveled his revolvers at the two forward guards, while the remaining one covered the two sentries behind the coach.

Although the four guards were heavily armed they were completely at the mercy of the two men occupying the central part of the coach roof. Expecting no danger from the two sleepy passengers the escorts had turned their entire attention to the roadside, and had thus met with an enemy from an unexpected quarter.

A moment later and the road seemed to be filled with men. They emerged from behind boulders and from the shadows, as if a troop of gnomes had suddenly popped up from the bowels of the earth.

The click! click! of rifles told of the death work impending. Everything was done with the precision of clock-work.

At the instant the rifle sounded in the ravine, the old passenger within the coach leaped from his seat and thrust a brace of revolvers almost into Mason's face. Eleanor uttered a slight scream and drew back into the furthest corner.

"Not a word," said the pretended traveler, "or I'll let daylight into your skull. I don't mean daylight for it's dark as Egypt. Out with your cash! I know you, Spencer Mason, and excuses are of no account with me. Money or bullets, that's biz!"

Mason stared hard at his assailant and sat speechless with astonishment, but the voice of his assailant roused him to a full sense of the situation.

"Come! Don't sit there as if you were petrified! Shell out the lucre. I've got you in a tight fix, old pard. I've been laying for you a long time to settle old scores. Is it possible you don't recognize my voice?"

"No; who are you?" gasped Mason. The man flung aside the wig of long white hair with beard attached, and exposed his features to the gaze of the mine-owner, who uttered a low wail, while his hand attempted to seek his hidden weapon.

"None o' that, you treacherous dog, or I'll bore a hole into your carcass with a full ounce of lead. Sol you know me, eh? To the residents of Colorado I'm known as Bully Bolton, but to you—you know me by another name! We are comrades in guilt, partners in crime. It's dog-eat-dog with me. I rob friend and foe when they traverse Hell Gate. Come, I've no time to waste with you. Out with your cash or I'll drop you dead in your seat, and you know I mean what I say for I bear you no friendship."

"Spare me! spare my daughter's feelings!" whined Mason, as he gazed into the tubes of the leveled weapons.

"Your daughter?" and Bolton spoke the words in a sneering manner, as a grim smile played on his sinister countenance.

The sound of an ax striking a metallic substance roused the road-agent, and warned him that his outlaw crew were already at work upon the treasure-box. Bolton instantly flung open the coach door, and, darting forward, he seized Eleanor in his arms and leaped out of the vehicle; then he blew a shrill blast upon a silver whistle and several forms darted to his side. A scream escaped from Eleanor's lips as the ruffians laid their hands upon her.

A shout, clear as a bugle-blast, rung through the ravine, and a horseman dashed upon the scene, riding down all who opposed him.

CHAPTER II.

THE TIGERS AND THE JACKALS.

THE villains who had seized the young girl in their rude grasp went down like stricken

bullocks, for the rider who suddenly appeared upon the scene fired his revolver twice in rapid succession, and reining the powerful black stallion that he rode, he leaned over and, ere Eleanor could realize that she was free from the grasp of the road-agent, she was gently raised upon the saddle before her rescuer.

From the dark recesses of the ravine there rode forth a troop of sable horsemen, who swept down upon the robbers and cut down all who failed to evade the onslaught of that mysterious band. Not a word—not a sound escaped from the lips of the black riders, although they rode bither and thither in pursuit of Bolton's followers. Like avenging furies they dashed upon the road-agents and spared none who came within the range of their pistols, or beneath the hoofs of their fiery steeds.

The brigands abandoned the treasure-box and fled for safety among the giant boulders. The men upon the coach recovered from their lethargy and prepared to recover the treasure. It was "out of the frying-pan into the fire," however, for the sable rescuers merely drew up in line and in turn brought the passengers, driver and escort under range of their weapons.

Upon the very first appearance of danger Bolton had beat a precipitate retreat, firing a harmless shot at the bold rider, who had rescued Eleanor. Once safe among the rocks he made his way to the summit of the tremendous mass and then glanced down into the ravine. He could hear the yells of his followers as they fled before the black band, and see the spiteful flash of their weapons.

"Curse that son of Satan, he has again cheated me of my prey when it was mine and within my grasp! I'll have a day of reckoning with that whelp of Erebus."

A large boulder dislodged by somebody went crashing down into the ravine, and Bolton's hand flew to his belt for his remaining weapon.

A form emerged from the gloom and approached the outlaw captain.

"Don't shoot, Cap!" called out the newcomer. "It's me Sid Wilson!"

Bolton lowered his pistol and a moment later the man stood beside him, and in a voice betraying chagrin, exclaimed:

"That's a nice finale to our well-laid scheme, isn't it?"

An oath fell from Bolton's lips ere he replied.

"It is the work of that nigger, Ebony Dan; but, mark me, Sid Wilson, I'll have his heart's blood for this night's work. This scheme could not have failed but for his interference. You and Sandy Keyes were on the coach and I was within. Every thing went well; the treasure-box was ours—all ours until the coming of that nigger and his gang. Have we lost any men, and is the chest beyond recovery?"

"We have lost three or four I believe; I couldn't see very well. The niggers are crack shots, and, blow me if I don't think they are in league with Satan himself. Bullets seem to have no effect upon their black carcasses. I fired point blank at Ebony Dan but it was like throwing paper wads at him. I don't think they're mortals. What spite have they got against us? Every time we are about to make a good haul they seem to spring up from the earth or drop down from the air itself and scatter us like a lot of jackals and cowardly coyotes. They've got the treasure-box and the nigger captain's got the gal—"

Bolton interrupted the speaker by uttering an expression of profanity in a voice hoarse with rage.

"We must take her from him, Wilson. I have waited my chances too long to be easily cheated of my vengeance now that an opportunity has presented itself. Wilson, I cannot at present tell you my motives. Suffice it to say that, in yonder coach the man whom I aided in a crime is now a passenger. He has avoided me and kept well concealed under an alias. He is rich—rich from the proceeds of that crime, while I wander in these regions

with a price upon my head. Had I secured the girl I would have brought him to terms. It would be killing two birds with one stone, for I'd make a good thing out of it for myself and the band, and also satisfy the cravings of vengeance. A greater rascal never dwelt outside of a prison than this same Spencer Mason, yet he moves about as if he was beyond reproach. Long have I waited for him, and to-night, by mere chance, he fell into my hands, only to be saved by that accursed nigger. Now, what's to be done, Wilson?" The rumbling of wheels far down the ravine told that the coach was again en route.

"There goes the coach! After all our plotting it is hard to lose the prize when 'tis most won," responded Wilson, as he listened to the rumbling of the departing vehicle.

From their point of observation the road-agent and his lieutenant could see the faint light of the bull's-eye lantern, carried by the sable riders, and the two baffled villains ground their teeth with rage as they rightly surmised that Ebony Dan's crew were at work upon the treasure-box. It was indeed very much like a score of tigers driving away the jackals from their prey in order to possess the feast and enjoy it.

In this case the two "jackals" were perched far up on the cliff overlooking the scene of their late fiasco.

For a few minutes neither ruffian spoke but with glaring eyes they watched the shadowy forms flitting to and fro while the distant sound of wheels grew fainter and fainter.

Bolton was the first to break the silence.

"Spencer Mason has escaped me," he hissed, apparently to himself.

"What is that man to you and why do you take it so to heart?"

Wilson's inquiry aroused Bolton and his manner was excited while he replied to his comrade's question.

"That man has escaped from my clutches and may never fall into them again. Fool that I was, I showed my cards too soon. I have betrayed the fact that I still live and track him. He will be upon his guard now, and it will be twice as hard for me to trap him, but I'll do it. Thanks to my disguises and my talent in that respect I'll nip him yet. I rode with him in that coach and yet he never discovered the trick nor recognized my voice until I announced myself to him and disclosed my features. So 'tis safe to say I can catch him again. But the golden opportunity is lost. Had I succeeded to-night I could have secured him in one of our mountain retreats and compelled him to disgorge. But there's no use crying over spilt milk."

"That's very true, but we'll never get the drop on the escort again. I tell you, Cap, we had worked the scheme to a T. We had our pots under their noses even when they were on the alert for the boys in the ravine. If it hadn't been for that son of Soot and his imp, we might now be fingering the lucre of the chest."

"Never mind; we'll originate something else, Wilson; but, first of all we must get rid of these black rivals. There is but room for one gang to work Silver Circle and it's surroundings, and that band must be Bully Bolton's or none at all. We must wipe out this black tiger and his followers; then once more we'll rule supreme in this section of Colorado. It's war to the knife hereafter, and woe to any of the nigger's gang who falls into my hands! It will be instant death to the imp, you may depend upon it. But, it is quite dark in the ravine and not a sound proceeds from its dark depths; so pose you go down, Wilson, and reconnoiter. See how many of our boys have fallen, and see if you can find out the direction taken by the niggers."

"All right! Where shall I rejoin you?"

"Near the cataracts. You know the entrance, don't you?"

"Yes," replied Wilson, and the lieutenant began his descent into the pass.

A death-like stillness reigned in the awful

precincts of "Hell Gate." Silently the mystic riders had departed from the place after routing Bolton's banditti, leaving no traces, for when Wilson reached the spot where the coach had been halted he discovered no signs of the sable horsemen; not even the corpse of one of his own comrades lay upon the ground to give evidence of the struggle! For a while Bolton's emissary rubbed his eyes and wondered if he was not the victim of hallucination.

Meanwhile Bolton, poised upon the verge of the cliff, grew impatient and gave vent to his anger frequently. "I wonder if that scoundrel *did* take the girl away? Curse him, I'd give ten years of my life to meet Ebony Dan, face to face," he exclaimed.

"Your wish is granted!" said a voice at his side, that caused Bolton to fairly leap with surprise.

CHAPTER III.

EBONY DAN.

WHEN Eleanor felt that a strong hand had raised her from the ground and seated her upon the saddle she naturally turned to observe the features of her rescuer. A rift in the clouds allowed a few straggling moonbeams to pierce the gloom and by aid of this pale light, she saw the countenance of the horseman. It was the features of a young negro, a face black as the raven.

The rider wore a large black Mexican sombrero and was attired in garments of the same hue.

The features were not coarse; on the contrary, quite pleasing and evincing the most marked outlines of the Caucasian. The lips were far from resembling those of the ordinary African and the teeth were white and even. The crispy, woolly hair alone, suggested the pure Ethiopian.

Eleanor drew back as her eyes rested upon the man and she made an effort to spring down to the ground and thus evade her new captor, but the horseman was quick to observe the movement and check it.

"Don't be askeer'd, miss; you isn't gwine to be harmed. I reckon de two men wct had a hold ob you is gwine to glory by dis time or to de odder place in a han' basket."

His voice was low and thrilling. Something in the tone of that voice instantly reassured Eleanor and even caused her heart to flutter wildly and a little cry of glad surprise struggled to escape from her rosy lips. But, one look at that dusky countenance soon dispelled the new hopes that had been called into her heart by the tones of the negro's voice.

The crack of the pistol and the hoarse cries of Bolton's comrades told of the struggle then transpiring in the ravine.

Eleanor saw the black riders moving to and fro like phantoms, now and then overtaking an escaping road-agent and discharging the wretch just as escape seemed assured.

It was a silent battle on the part of the horsemen.

The fair girl looked anxiously about to discover the form of her father. Spencer Mason was at that moment crouched in a corner of the coach, and thinking of nothing but himself and the money concealed about him. The armed escort had recovered from their inactivity and surprise and now stood ready to repel an attack. It seemed that but a moment had elapsed from the time the dark horsemen appeared, until the white robbers were routed and forced to abandon the treasure chest and flee. Then came a most unexpected and startling incident. By word of command the sable riders wheeled about, right and left, and in a few seconds they had entirely surrounded the coach, and each silent horseman leveled a short carbine at the group seated upon the top of the coach. Not a word, not a syllable from those statue-like riders, nothing but the hostile movement with the weapons, and that spoke volumes to the escort and the driver.

It said just as plain as if spoken:—"Now that we have overpowered the first band of

thieves, we'll take a hand in the booty, and use the old saying to advantage—to the victors belong the spoils."

Meanwhile, the beautiful girl had remained a passive witness of the scene. She could not fail to observe that the dark horsemen seemed to take all orders by signs from the man who had rescued her. She rightfully concluded that this personage was the leader of the riders.

"De trouble is all over," he observed as he saw his followers in full possession of the ravine and surrounding the coach. "We've given Bully Bolton anodder wollop in', and stole de money-box right from under his nose. Now, miss, you is at liberty to rejoin your father!"

Here was food for mental reflection. How did the black brigand know that her father was within the coach, or that any relations existed between them? Eleanor looked in a dazed manner as if the negro had surprised her both in allowing her to escape and in speaking of her father.

"You needn't be s'prised, miss," he added. "I know dat Spencer Mason was a passenger on dis coach, and I knew dat his lubly daughter would be 'long wid him. Dat was de reason I made up my min' dat you shouldn't be troubled by Bolton. De storm caused a delay, but I got here in time. All I want for my reward is de treasure-box from de coach and a promise from you, Miss Eleanor Mason."

"A promise from me?" repeated the young lady.

"Yes; one dat you can easily grant if your heart is true to promises made long ago."

Even as the negro spoke he gently took the maiden's hand and aided her to dismount.

"You is free to enter dat coach and proceed on your journey. When you hear Ebony Dan's name mentioned, and you hear dat he is a black ruffian, you will remember dat he was polite to a lady and dat he would 'low no harm to come to her while she was under his protection," said he, bowing politely.

The circle of dark horsemen made a passage for the girl as she proceeded to the coach and entered the vehicle. For the first time Ebony Dan, as he had announced himself, spoke to the group upon the coach.

"I'm gwine to take nuffin' but de express box. Dat chest was 'most stole from you, anyway, and second thief's the best owner. You might 'a' had a funeral 'mongst you if Bolton hadn't been tampered wid by me and my daisies. Now de pint is dis: Does you gib up de chest widout any talk or a struggle, or must I bore holes in anybody dat 'poses de right of Ebony Dan to buckle on to dat money-box?"

A short consultation followed among the four men comprising the escort, and the spokesman of the quartette addressed the dark rider:

"Ebony Dan, we don't want any trouble with you. We are satisfied that you keep the chest, for four can't whip twenty. Give us credit for *trying* to save the chest, will you?"

"An' you gib me credit for savin' your lives from Bully Bolton's gang. When you hears de Vig'lants up at Silver Circle denounce Ebony Dan, speak a good word for him; dat's all I ask in return from you men. You've been sent out to protect dat box, but you might as well try to move de Heavens as to try to escape from Ebony Dan's riders if you make de least effort to use a weapon."

Two of the dusky horsemen seized the iron-bound box and bore it away. The remainder sat immovable in their saddles, and suddenly there flashed forth a single ray of light from each mounted bandit. The light proceeded from small bull's-eye lanterns whose slides had been shot back at a signal. A blaze of light now surrounded the stage-coach and enabled the occupants to see the features of the negro riders and their sable leader.

Ebony Dan approached the window of the coach and reined in the steed while he peered into the vehicle, and exclaimed:

"Spencer Mason, one word wid you before dis coach rolls out ob dis ravine."

"What is it?" demanded the mine owner,

from the rear seat, drawing back to escape the rays of Ebony Dan's lantern.

"De next time dat you dare to cross dis trail and you fall into my han's I'll hang you to de nearest tree. You remember dat, and make a note ob it."

Ebony Dan noticed the expression of pain resting upon Eleanor's face, and he quickly added, "Your presence here to-night has saved him. Dat his life is spared on *your* account, miss, please remember it in time to come. Let Spencer Mason also bear in mind dat Edwin Carson will some day have a reckoning wid him."

Eleanor uttered a cry of mingled joy and pain as she heard the name of Edward Carson proceeding from the lips of the black outlaw. Spencer Mason lay back in the coach, speechless, and the lantern revealed his face white as a sheet, his eyes fixed upon the black features of the outlaw and his tongue cleaving to the roof of his mouth.

"Now drive on," commanded Ebony Dan in tones of authority to the man grasping the reins of the restless horses.

Then he again leaned forward and hastily spoke a few words to Eleanor.

"Remember, I asked you to grant me a promise."

"What shall it be?"

"Believe Edward Carson an innocent man and never cease to love and trust him!"

"I promise—sacredly!" was Eleanor's tremulous response. Then the coach was speeding onward.

"God bless her!" murmured the negro horseman gazing after the receding vehicle and then he signaled his dusky followers to his side.

"Remove all traces ob de conflict and follow me to de Wildcat Mountain."

Ebony Dan turned his steed and sped along in an opposite direction from Silver Circle.

CHAPTER IV.

THE RIVAL ROAD-AGENTS.

"YOUR wish is granted!"

Bolton whirled around, and his eyes rested upon a tall figure who stood within two feet of the spot where he had taken up a point of observation.

The outlaw felt a cold chill shooting through his frame, like sparks of electricity, for a second glance revealed a brace of polished weapons in the grasp of the man whose voice he had heard.

"Ebony Dan!" fell from the road-bandit's lips as he gazed upon the black features of his formidable rival.

"Yes, and your sworn foe," replied Dan in menacing tones.

"Why is it that you have selected this part of the silver regions for your operations? Surely there is room enough in the diggings for both leagues. Why is it that you constantly thwart me in my purposes? You have killed off several of my best men and cheated me out of the fruits of my schemes;—what have I done to you that you should harass me in this manner?"

Bully Bolton's voice was no longer that of bold defiance, but whining and deprecating.

It was several seconds before Dan replied to the ruffian.

"You ask many questions which you could answer yourself if you had brains enough to think over your many acts of cruelty and treachery. Let it suffice dat I have ample cause to hound you whereever you may go. It's true dat I have killed off a good many ob your followers but remember dat, after dem, comes your turn; and it's a-comin' mighty soon."

"What have I ever done to you?"

"Enough dat you and I bofe can't live in dis world. De world is not big enough to hold you and I. You can remember your partnership wid Spencer Mason; you remember how you and he stained your hands wid blood. Dar's an old saying dat when thieves fall out honest men will get dere dues. You and Spencer Mason have fallen out and de dues are yet

to come. I have warned you; now profit by de warning. If you are wise you'll leave dis country after denouncing Spencer Mason and his villainies. I'll always keep an eye on you and when I gets tired of your deviltries I'll rid de world ob a rascal. Now off wid you! I means bizness, and I might change my mind and stuff you full o' lead inmejetly. Git!"

Bully Bolton needed no second invitation but turned and dashed away, thanking his stars that he had escaped. He scarcely knew how he passed down the steep declivity. He leaped from rock to rock like a wild chamois, and finally paused in the solitude of the gloomy ravine.

Waiting and listening his bravado returned, and he gave voice to the maddened thoughts in his heart.

"Curse the nigger! What does he know of Mason or I? He spoke as if he knew everything. Now the question is where does he come from? who is he? I've heard of this Ebony Dan for the last six months but never met him before. This gang of niggers must be wiped out or my occupation's gone. There is one thing certain—that gang is under strict discipline and they do their work like artists. If I could handle my ruffians like that I'd be the terror of the country. Before Ebony Dan appeared in these regions I ruled supreme, but now my popularity, even among my followers, is on the wane. Strange what a sensation this nigger has created in Silver Circle. His name is upon everybody's lips and the Vigilants will soon be prying into the dark precincts of Hell Gate. That will be bad work for me. Up to the present time I've had full sway at the treasure-boxes passing through this gulch, but that nigger is bound to deprive me of that privilege also. Curse him! curse him!" he cried vehemently and as he concluded his wild harangue, he was startled by the sudden appearance of his confederate, Sid Wilson.

"Well, what's the news?"

"No traces of anything. The coach is gone and the niggers have captured the money-box and lit out. Not a sign of any of our lads with their toes turned up. Everything is silent as the tomb. Best thing we can do is to make ourselves scarce in the gulch and fix up a scheme to get even."

"Get even? Sid, I'll have a terrible vengeance for this night's work," averred Bolton.

"You deserve to be shunned by every man of the league if you do not make an effort to capture this Ebony Dan and torture the nigger in a horrible manner to atone for his share of the work."

Sid Wilson evidently held Bolton accountable for the failure of the scheme and looked to his chief for ample redress.

Both ruffians wended their way through the ravine until they emerged from the dark portals of the gulch and proceeded toward a low range of hills to the north-east.

The rout had been complete for neither Bolton nor his comrade saw any signs of their chums in the vicinity, and, as for the sable riders, they had vanished from the locality almost as mysteriously as they had appeared upon the scene.

While the two partners in crime are wending their way to their rendezvous we will follow the coach wherein Spencer Mason and his lovely daughter are again *en route* to the busy little town called Silver Circle. The motion of the coach reassured Mason and he gave vent to a sigh of relief when several miles were placed between the vehicle and the spot occupied by Ebony Dan and his men.

"Father, tell me, what is the nature of the acquaintance existing between you and those men?—Each seemed to know and threaten you."

Mason evaded the question by merely replying in an indifferent manner, but his fair daughter renewed the question.

"Speak not of those ruffians, Eleanor," said he somewhat brusquely. "I do not know them or care for their idle threats. It

is very plain that I have been mistaken for some one else, that's all."

"But, father, the negro spoke of Edward Carson—"

"Silence! Do not mention that villain's name to me," cried Mason. "You know he is a red-handed murderer. The blood of my eldest brother cries for justice and my conscience smites me for allowing him to escape. Knowing that you loved him I shielded him from the fury of the lynchers and allowed him to flee."

"Father, you know he was innocent."

"Girl, do not anger me by upholding that miscreant. Like the warmed serpent, he turned upon his benefactor. He repaid my kindness by murdering my brother. He is an outcast, and a price is set upon his head. Although I connived at his escape, I would gladly surrender him into the hands of the Vigilance Committee if I but knew his lurking place. Never speak his name again. I brought you from your northern school to these wilds where I could watch over and protect you from the villains who infest this world." The speaker paused as if the words were choking him, and a long silence ensued.

When Mason again glanced toward the fair girl she had buried her face within a snowy kerchief and sobs were struggling to escape from her tremulous lips. An hour later the coach rolled into Silver Circle and an excited group spread the news of the robbery and struggle between the rival leagues.

CHAPTER V.

A STARTLING INTERVIEW.

INTENSE excitement reigned in the town when it became known that Ebony Dan had captured the treasure-box. Spencer Mason contributed lavishly to the reward offered for the apprehension of the black outlaw; but his main efforts were directed toward Bully Bolton and his league. He urged the capture of Bolton, and offered an additional reward for the taking of the outlaw, dead or alive.

"While that man lives I am in constant dread," he mused. "Once he is in the hands of the lynchers, I will breathe easier and realize that no living being can expose my record. When Bolton is removed I'll put a trusty emissary upon Carson's track and soon remove him, also."

The Vigilantes were incensed to think that a band of negroes had taken possession of the trails, usurping the places of the white outlaws. They began preparations in earnest, to swoop down upon the bandits at an early day.

Spencer was impatient and fretted over the delay in fitting out the expedition. Meanwhile the outward bound coach was stopped by Ebony Dan and his sable comrades, and the inmates of the coach plundered but not maltreated. This caused Spencer to again urge the speedy departure of the armed expedition.

Several days after the robbery Mason sat in the little room that he termed his private office. The lamp was burning brightly, and the mine-owner was seated before a table examining a package of documents. He had locked the door and closed the shutters; so he feared no intrusion. A small safe stood in one corner of the room, and, heaped upon the iron receptacle, were volumes of books and surveyor's implements. Maps of the State of Colorado and its silver regions hung upon the walls and small "claim" maps littered the corner of the apartment. The documents had been just taken from the safe, for the iron door remained partly opened.

He unfolded several folded papers and selecting one from the number he examined it carefully.

"I am rich beyond expectation," he murmured; "the new yield is some thing grand. I find that these papers establish John Mason's claim to it. It will prove to be a rich lode. How fortunate that I am the sole owner of that mine! Dead men tell no tales."

"But live ones do!" said a voice close to his ears.

Spencer Mason leaped from his chair, dashing the documents right and left and almost upsetting the lamp in his excited movements. His eyes fairly bulged from their sockets as they rested upon the features of his midnight visitor. His hand moved toward the small drawer in the table, but a warning from his visitor caused him to abandon his intentions. The warning was accompanied by an ominous looking revolver in the hand of the intruder.

"Touch the pistol you've got in that drawer and I'll bore a hole into your skull sure's my name is Bolton!"

"What do you want here?" gasped Mason, turning in his chair.

"A short interview with you, so we can balance accounts," answered Bolton, seating himself opposite the mine-owner and toying with his revolver.

"Our accounts have been settled long ago," exclaimed Mason. "Do you know that your presence here in Silver Circle means death to you if you are seen and caught?"

"I'm taking chances, pard, I admit, but it's worth the risk to once more have a confidential chat with you. The other night we were unpleasantly interrupted."

"Don't you know it's death for you to be caught by the Regulators? You'll be strung up!" Mason persisted.

"Some one else is in danger of being strung up! Now, Spencer Mason, cease your blab about my safety. I'll look after my life and you do likewise. I warn you that I want no unnecessary talk with you. Come to the point at once. I know that you have inflamed the Vigilantes against me in particular. You contemptible hypocrite, you are doing this to rid yourself of me! But, mark me; I'll denounce you as sure as there is a Heaven above us if you persist in your purpose. Withdraw the reward you have added for my capture or I'll speak. I know how you have become the sole possessor of the mine, and you know who it was that aided your bloody work. You have reaped a harvest and I have received but a pittance from you for my share of the work. You have fastened guilt upon an innocent man and you fancy yourself safe!"

"Why do you speak to me of the past? You have been paid for your work and I owe you nothing," and Mason's manner was defiant.

Bolton brought down his fist upon the table with terrific force and an oath flew from his lips. "You do owe me something—you owe me for my silence! You've paid me for my work, but I'll mighty soon let you know how we stand if you fail to come to my terms. You are a man of influence to-day, but to-morrow I can blast you and have you driven forth from this town or hung by the very men you are now urging to hunt me down. It depends upon you whether I am silent or speak. Carson is a fugitive through your representations, but I could clear the man if I but revealed the truth. You are in possession of wealth that belongs to your dead brother's child—"

"Hush! Not so loud! Be silent," Mason glanced nervously about as if he feared that listeners were at the door or window. He would have given half of his wealth if he could have stricken down the bold partner of his crimes and forever have silenced him.

Bolton laughed, a low, mocking laugh, as he noted Mason's nervousness, and he smiled at the mine-owner's discomfiture. "So you do fear my tongue after all, eh? Well, it rests with you whether you are safe or denounced. Now, look you! I have but a short time to remain here, and I must make good use of it, too. I have terms to offer. You have only to accept or decline them. Accede and you may rest in safety; decline and I will reveal the secret of your wealth and see that John Mason's child is put in full possession of her rights."

"What terms do you propose?" demanded Mason, after a few moments of reflection, during which Bolton amused himself by examining the chambers of his pistol.

"First, you must withdraw your reward

and influence the members of the Vigilance Committee to turn their attention to Ebony Dan, and allow me and my comrades to go unmolested. I will abandon this locality if they will accede to your demands. Next, I want a certain sum of money to enable me to leave the country forever. I will of course take to myself a wife, and I have determined to confer that honor upon Eleanor Mason!"

"What?" Spencer fairly leaped from his chair, and his voice was hoarse with passion. "You marry my daughter—never!"

Again Bolton gave vent to his low, mocking laugh and motioned Spencer Mason to remain seated and listen.

"Stop this nonsense," he warned. "Don't affect indignation. We are equal, for we were partners in guilt. My record is as clean as yours. If I marry Eleanor—your daughter—hem!—I'll make her a good husband, and that will effectually close my mouth. You will be much safer then. Now you have heard my terms; what is your answer?"

Mason moved about uneasily in his seat, for he saw that Bolton eyed the open safe and that the ruffian was about to pick up the documents which lay upon the floor. Spencer Mason knew that he must attract Bolton's attention at once, or the outlaw would examine the papers or peer within the safe.

"Very well, my dear friend; I will accede to your wishes. You and I will be firm friends hereafter. I will see my daughter and at once state my wishes. I have no doubt that she will do just as I desire. Now, friend Bolton, I hope you are satisfied."

During the time that Mason was speaking he was busily engaged in picking up the documents and replacing them in the safe and instantly locking it.

"Hold up, friend Mason! You have forgotten one important item in my demands. Hand over some of that cash as an installment and guarantee of good faith."

Mason groaned aloud as he reopened the safe and drew out a small bag of coin which he placed in Bolton's hand.

"How much?" he asked.

"Four thousand dollars in gold."

"Good enough!" was the laconic reply as the ruffian pocketed the amount. "I will call again to-morrow night for your daughter's answer; and now, friend Mason, good-night! Pleasant dreams."

Bolton walked to the door, and to Mason's astonishment he saw that it was unlocked although he felt sure that he had turned the key in the lock.

Bolton passed out and the mine-owner instantly seized a heavy revolver and darted toward the door.

CHAPTER VI.

BANDIT AGAINST BRIGAND.

IN order that the reader may fully understand the state of affairs existing at the opening of our story it will be necessary to give a passing sketch of several persons who are prominently concerned in it.

John and Spencer Mason first sought the silver regions during the excitement following the discovery of precious metals in that part of Colorado.

John Mason left a wife and child in Baltimore in order to seek the new Eldorado unincumbered. After several years' absence his wife died and the little girl was placed in an institution to receive an education.

The brothers thrived and became the joint possessors of valuable claims. Spencer Mason was a shrewd man who invested carefully and grasped his gains with the eagerness of the confirmed miser. Gold was his idol and he worshiped that idol blindly, sacrificing everything to gain it. Six months before the opening of our story a young man arrived from the East. Seeking employment he was given a clerkship in the office of the Mason brothers.

Edward Carson was an intelligent young fellow who served his employers honestly and faithfully, and John Mason became somewhat

attached to him. A strange coincidence was that Edward had formed the acquaintance of Eleanor Mason at school, and the young couple exchanged vows of love ere Edward departed for Colorado. Her strange history had impressed the young man, for she remembered but little of her parents. She knew that remittances came regularly from Colorado, apparently from her father, and she longed for the day when she would be summoned by him to journey to the silver regions to be clasped to a parent's bosom. By a very strange turn in the wheel of fate, Edward found employment with the Mason brothers, and he often puzzled his brain to determine which of the two was the father of the girl he loved. Both were strange men, who kept everybody at a distance, scarcely ever exchanging a dozen words with their clerk or messengers.

Although John Mason rather admired the handsome young fellow who transacted most of their business, he never, by word or deed, conveyed such an impression; on the contrary, he was severe, and often disagreeable.

One day the mail-coach brought a letter that caused Edward Carson's heart to beat wildly with joy. This letter was from Eleanor, and she stated that her father had at last summoned her to meet him, and ere long she hoped to be en route to the silver regions.

That very night an awful tragedy threw the town of Silver Circle into the wildest excitement. John Mason was found murdered in his office, and Spencer at once denounced Edward Carson as the assassin. A howling mob surrounded the place, and, despite his protestations of innocence, Carson was dragged to a tree by the lynchers and a rope fixed about his neck.

By a most extraordinary accident he broke from the yelling mob and, amid a perfect shower of bullets, he reached the shelter of the rocky outskirts of the town, and, aided by the darkness, succeeded in eluding his pursuers and escaping. But he was outlawed, and a price set upon his head.

In the midst of the excitement following the burial, Eleanor arrived, and Spencer at once proclaimed the lovely girl as his daughter and related the circumstances of the murder and the flight of the murderer.

Eleanor refused to believe her lover guilty, but evidence was strong against him, for Spencer told a clear story and swore to its truth in every respect.

The poor girl's grief can well be imagined; for the first time her young life was shadowed and she drank the cup of sorrow to its dregs. Spencer offered immense rewards for the capture of the murderer dead or alive. But Carson baffled all efforts to retake him and disappeared from the State.

The numerous mining claims were now the sole property of Spencer Mason, who soon put himself in full possession of the mines. He seemed to lavish all the affections that his selfish nature was capable of bestowing upon his beautiful daughter.

Her heart longed for its first love, and, sleeping or waking, her thoughts were ever of the youth who now wandered with the crime of murder fixed upon him. She alone believed him innocent for she knew the noble nature of the man who had won her heart, and she refused to believe him guilty until she could hear from his own lips the story of that dreadful night. The words uttered by the road-agents were treasured in her mind. She remembered the abject terror displayed by her father and the threats of the robber who seemed to know him so well. There was a mystery which surrounded the entire affair and the brave young woman determined to unravel it.

It will be recalled that Spencer Mason followed after the retreating figure of the road-agent as he passed out of the mine-owner's office. Baffled, and quivering with rage Mason stood upon the sidewalk, vainly looking for traces of the man he feared and hated. Bolton had disappeared, for the cunning freebooter knew full well that the mine-owner would seize

upon the first chance to commit a treacherous act in order to free himself of his confederate's presence. Therefore Bolton passed into a low doorway and from his place of concealment observed the movements of the man who had followed upon his track. When Mason had returned to his office and reclosed the door Bolton emerged from his hiding-place and pursued his way down into the lower part of the town.

"I could pop him down mighty easy if I had a notion," said he, as he hurried onward, "but I'd be a fool to kill the goose that will lay golden eggs for me. I must keep an eye on him, for he's getting desperate."

Bolton turned down into a dark passage between masses of rock that had prevented the erection of buildings. About forty yards down this gloomy, ravine-like passage the bandid suddenly paused, for he saw, dimly outlined, a man and horse, directly in his path.

"Is that you, Cap?" was asked in a voice which Bolton appeared to recognize, for he approached the speaker.

"Yes, Sid, and I've met with more than ordinary success, too. I've seen old Mason—actually went into his shebang and forced him to shell out."

"How did you get in?"

"No trouble to open the door for he left the key in the lock. I took a pair of pliers and opened the door just as easy as though he had allowed it to remain ajar for my coming. I forced him to shell out four thousand dollars."

"Good enough!" ejaculated Wilson. "I waited here according to agreement, but I felt like giving up once or twice as the hours dragged along. Here's the horse, all ready for you."

"I've concluded to do something else before returning to our stronghold. While I'm here I can just take a peep into the saloon and by keeping my ears and eyes open I can ascertain when to expect a visit from the Regulators, and also find out if there's any bullion coming in or going out of town."

"Very good idea," admitted Wilson. "How about the horse?"

"I was coming to that," said Bolton. "Wait until I change my appearance, for there might be some folks who would recognize my phiz as it appears at present and that would spoil my scheme."

Whereupon he took some articles from the saddle-pouch and quickly arranged a wig upon his head, and then with a few changes of clothing, he was ready to depart. He placed several objects in the saddle-pouches and turning to Wilson gave him a few parting instructions.

"You know the 'red light' don't you, Sid? well, that's where I'm going. Have the horse ready at the back of the building. I may find myself in a tight scrape and might want to get out and away in a mighty short time. Be on guard and have the animal ready for me. Now, good-by, old chum; I'll get the lay of the land and give the Regulators a roasting, if I can."

Bolton retraced his steps and once more emerged upon the street above. From the many shanties and more pretentious buildings, many lights told of groups still battling the games of chance, and invoking the fickle goddess. The murmur of many voices and the rattling of coin sounded from each open doorway.

Bolton paused before a large saloon where a red light cast a ruddy glow about the portals of this gambling den. Those who looked up as he entered saw but a weather-beaten miner whose grizzled hair and beard fell upon a tattered and faded red shirt.

A black slouched hat covered his head. The wide brim shading the features gave the person a much older look. He shuffled up to the bar and called hoarsely for whisky.

Even while drinking the fiery liquid the assumed miner's eyes swept the assemblage and he noted every face present. He saw many whom he knew to be connected with the Vig-

lance Committee and he kept at a respectful distance. Bolton leaned against the bar and was on the point of interrogating the rough specimen of humanity acting as bar-tender, when a man approached, evidently intending to quit the place. The instant that Bolton's eyes rested upon the tall, well-formed personage, he gave vent to a low cry of surprise. The features were somewhat disguised but the freebooter recognized them.

He leaped out, revolver in hand, and in a loud voice exclaimed:

"Gentlemen! here's a man with a price on his head. Here's the murderer of John Mason! This is Edward Carson."

A score of armed men leaped to their feet and weapons flashed into view. The man who had been denounced as Carson leaped toward the back part of the saloon, and a brace of ugly revolvers appeared in each grasp. For a moment the game was forgotten and a circle of howling men dashed toward the youth.

CHAPTER VII.

THE DOVE IN THE TALONS OF THE HAWK.

BOLTON had managed to draw attention from himself and denounce a hunted outlaw at the same time. It was with intense satisfaction that he, also, produced a formidable weapon and joined in the general assault.

The young man fell back, slowly, holding his revolvers in a threatening manner.

"Down with your shooting-irons!" yelled the foremost man.

The youth saw that it meant instant death to be taken by the howling mob, for Spencer Mason had poisoned the entire community against him, and no words would avail to save him from the fate in store should he fall into the hands of the maddened crowd. He leaned against a froil door and his fingers pressed the triggers of his weapons.

A sharp flash leaped from each muzzle and the shots sped in opposite directions. A bullet went crashing into the glass lamp hanging from the ceiling and extinguished it. The other leaden missile furrowed its way into the brain of the foremost man, and he fell with a dull thud to the floor.

The crack of many weapons sounded through the room as the lamp fell shattered to the floor, plunging the apartment in gloom. Only a momentary darkness, however, for light soon flashed into view from several points.

Even as the youth discharged his pistols he threw his entire weight against the door. It yielded, and as the lamp was extinguished, the young man passed through the doorway and found himself in the open air, directly behind the building.

"Here, Cap, this way!" came a voice close at hand. The youth sprang away in that direction and to his utter surprise found a horse awaiting a master. One bound placed him in the saddle and the next moment he was speeding away.

The crowd poured from the building in time to see both horse and rider disappearing in the gloom.

Pistols cracked spitefully, but the bullets flew wide of their mark.

Foremost in the mass was Bolton, and a bitter oath arose to his lips as he beheld the daring escape.

He dashed about in a frenzied manner, shouting to those present to follow in pursuit. As none of the men who had that night frequented the "Red-light" happened to be the owner of a horse close at hand, the pursuit was reluctantly abandoned, at least for that night.

Bolton did not return to the saloon but wandered in a dazed manner in the direction taken by the fugitive. Passing a pile of old packing-cases he collided with a man who was seeking to avoid him. In an instant both men recognized each other in spite of the dim light.

"Schorchin' furies, cap'n; I'm surprised to see you. I thought you were in the saddle and a dozen miles away by this time," exclaimed the man.

"Satan take the luck! How could you make

such a mistake! It has spoilt everything. How came you to blunder that way?" demanded Bolton, angrily.

"Let me explain: I waited with the horse, as we agreed upon; I heard the row inside and the pistol-shots that followed; I made up my mind that the gang had dropped on you. In the dark I saw some one come crashing through the back door and I naturally supposed it was you. I called out and the fellow jumped on the horse and went like a streak of lightning. I was just sneaking away when you run into me. Sorry it happened Cap; couldn't be helped, you know. Mistakes will happen in the best regulated families."

Instead of pacifying Bolton, it only inflamed him the more, and he raved and cursed everything and everybody.

"Oh let it go," growled Wilson, growing tired of the torrent of abuse heaped upon him. "It's only the loss of a horse, anyway."

"Loss of a horse!" yelled Bolton, with an oath. "I wish that was all. No; the fellow's got one of the best nags in the country and the four thousand dollars that I got from old Mason is in the saddle-pouch!"

Wilson gave vent to a long whistle.

"Four thousand dollars in the saddle-pouch?" he repeated.

"Yes; I placed the money there because it would be safe, and not be a load in my pocket to-night," replied Bolton.

"Well, it won't be a load in your pocket, to-night," remarked Wilson, with provoking sarcasm.

"It's bad enough to be harassed by that imp of the devil, Ebony Dan, but now that I had made a haul I must lose that also! Everything seems to go against us, lately; no luck—no luck. God help the next escort on the coach if they attempt resistance! I'll massacre every living soul of them. Somebody will suffer for all this," and Bolton fairly gnashed his teeth in his fury.

Suddenly he paused and faced Wilson. "A new idea!" said he, bluntly.

"What is it, Cap?"

"I'm going to turn my attention toward Eleanor Mason—if I can carry her off to my stronghold we can name our own terms."

"Capital! capital!" exclaimed Wilson, approvingly. "How do you propose to work it?"

"Easy enough! Sim Ryan occupies a little log shanty just over the creek, commanding a good view of the Mason homestead and the grounds. Well, Ryan is one of us, so I can use the shanty as an observatory, watch my chances and pounce down like a hawk upon the unsuspecting dove. You return to the hills, select two or three of the boys and come well mounted and well armed; I may need you to cover my retreat."

"When shall we look for you?"

"To-morrow night. Wait in the gully near Ryan's shanty. If I am successful I'll signal and let you know. Now away with you; we've experienced a hard streak of luck lately but I think we have reached the turning point and we'll reap a harvest, after all. I'll make my way to Ryan's and stop there for the balance of the night."

A few seconds later Wilson was on his way back to the mountain retreat of the freebooters while Bolton pursued a course leading to the northern outskirts of Silver Circle.

"How easily I can pull the wool over Wilson's eyes!" muttered Bolton. "He imagines that I am about to abduct the girl in order to obtain a large reward and share it with him. Ha! ha! ha! If he only knew my real intentions he wouldn't be in such a hurry to obey my instructions. No, indeed! Once Eleanor Mason is in my hands I'll make sure of her; she'll become mine and then we'll see who owns the bonanza claims. I'll show Spencer Mason a trick that he does not dream I can perform."

Bolton sauntered along in high glee, communing with himself and anticipating an easy victory.

He soon reached the dilapidated shanty after crossing the stream by aid of the rude log bridge.

Ryan had evidently enjoyed numerous "sups" from the brown jug, for Bolton had to rap at the door until the crazy barrier almost flew from its hinges ere the sleepy occupants arose and admitted him.

"Come in, Cap, come in," said the drowsy confederate; "hold on till I strike a light and save you from breaking your neck."

Bolton followed his guide into the room and the twain sat down before the dying embers of the fire. In a very few words the road-agent explained matters to his companion. From the window of the hut a good view could be obtained of Mason's house, situated upon a knoll close by.

A small patch of land, like an oasis in that desert of rocks, had been cultivated, and bright flowers were blooming.

This was Eleanor's little garden, and a tall, lank Chinaman presided over the little patch.

On the following morning, when Bolton awoke, he saw the Celestial at work among the plants, and in a very short time he saw a fairy figure tripping down the path toward the garden. It was Eleanor, and the road-agent moved uneasily toward the door. But Ryan checked him.

"I may lose this chance," said the villain.

"No you won't, for she'll be 'round them plants again about dark. That's your chance; if you're hasty you'll spoil it all," warned Ryan.

The ruffian acknowledged the wisdom of his comrade and abandoned his intentions at that hour. He contented himself by watching the beautiful girl moving to and fro among the plants, followed by the grinning Mongolian.

Hong Wing had acquired a smattering of English, and was quite an acquisition to the Mason household. He was attached to the little family and devoted to Eleanor.

From the crumbling shanty across the creek Bolton watched, with glaring eyes, and clearly showed his impatience as the hours dragged slowly along.

Finally the sun, like a huge ball of fire, sunk slowly beyond the range of hills and the dark shadows gathered to herald the approach of night.

Bolton emerged from the shanty and crossed the bridge. He concealed himself among a thick growth of briars. It was even as Ryan had predicted. Eleanor again visited her treasures and Hong Wing shuffled along, chattering like an ape. Bolton waited for a favorable opportunity, then sprang out quickly and felled Hong Wing to the earth. He placed his rough hand over Eleanor's lips, and as if she had been a mere infant, raised her in his arms and dashed away across the frail bridge. Once beyond the shanty he blew the well known signal upon the bone whistle and to his delight the horses and several outlaws hove in sight. It was the work of a few moments to mount and speed away through the dismal gully in the direction of their stronghold. The dove was indeed in the talons of the hawk and soon to be in its eyrie.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE VENERABLE NIGGER AND HIS MULE.

HONG WING could give no satisfactory account of the abduction. He had been felled suddenly and when he again returned to consciousness his head felt as if a million wasps had interviewed him. Mason cursed the Mongolian and vainly attempted to receive a description of the assailant and abductors.

"Hong Wing no can tell," whined the Chinaman piteously, "me no see nothin' but star; me tinkie sky fullee fire-crackee and pin-wheel. Oh! Mellican man hittee Hong Wing wit' hamme."

The Celestial bewailed the discolored eye received in the assault and cried when he realized that his young mistress was in the hands of lawless men. If Spencer Mason suspected Bolton he did not betray the fact to any one

present, but hastened to the lower portion of the town and sought the controlling spirits of the Committee of Regulators. In a few hours the town was up and in arms.

Groups of excited men darted to and fro and a general war upon gamblers and vicious characters was imminent.

It was during this confusion that a strange-looking personage mounted upon a bony animal, appeared on the main street. The animal was a dirty-looking mule that may have been white at an early period. It ambled along at an unsteady, camel-like gait; its long ears flapping about like the sails of a wind-mill.

Upon the creature's back sat an old negro almost bent double with age. He clutched the rope that served as a bridle and ever and anon rattled his heels upon the "animated skeleton" that he bestrode in order to accelerate its pace.

His garments were a mass of fluttering rags and a dilapidated white hat covered the snow-white wool crowning his cranium. A few struggling tufts of white hair grew upon his chin and only served to give his features a darker shade if such a thing were possible.

He carried a small basket as if the provisions purchased were of considerable weight.

His thin piping voice arose at intervals as he upbraided the mule for its slow and unsteady gait. "Look out dar, you Goliath! steady or you'll lan' me head-fuss in dat mud. Dat would be a nice ting for you to do. Keep dem eyes peeled, you heah me? Dar you go! up to your knees in slime! Lor' bress me, I never see'd such a dog-goned fool of a animile in all my born days. I reckon if dar was a lam'-post right in de way you'd go right up and buck your brains out ag'in' it. Dar's no use talking, Goliath, your tack is a-gettin' jist like a buzz saw. High livin' don't 'gree wid you. Your back-bone is sharp as a razor and I'm most saved in haff. I 'clar' I is."

He moved uneasily upon the creature's back, but whether it was because the animal's back-bone projected in an unpleasant manner, or because his eyes rested upon the armed groups that appeared on the rough board sidewalks, was not plain to an observer.

His eyes rested upon the excited men while his words were addressed to his dumb companion. The men frequently crossed from one side of the street to the other in order to join comrades who emerged from the saloons.

"I wonder what's up?" murmured the old negro. "Ah!" he exclaimed, aloud, and tugged at the rope-bridle. The cause of the exclamation was two men who were crossing the street and who narrowly escaped a collision with the "near-sighted" mule.

"Look after that old plug!" shouted one of the men. "He'll run into somebody and kill himself. Where did you get that old bone-yard?"

The old negro straightened up and patting the mule affectionately, he replied:

"Dat's an old relic, gemmen! Dat mule was wid ole Noah in de ark—it's a fact, and we've got de docyment in our family to prove it. Gemmen you 'members hearin' about de dove dat was sent out ob de ark to fin' dry lan'? Well, sah! I kin prove de fac' dat instead ob a dove it was dis ole mule dat him out de ark and went back ag'in wid a olive branch tied to his ear."

A loud peal of laughter greeted the old negro's explanation, and he seemed offended that the mule should be the object of merriment, for he quickly added:

"Gemmen! please don't laff; respect ole age, 'specially when de 'pusson was de fuss to set foot on de arf when de waters 'vaporated."

Quite a crowd had now assembled around the two grotesque characters, the mule and the negro—and all joined in the laughter occasioned by his broad dialect and the child-like simplicity with which he related the qualities of the forlorn looking animal.

"What do you feed him on?" yelled a tall miner on the outskirts of the crowd,

"Gemmen, dat mule is juss as pertickler 'bout his eatin' as a em'por. He likes custard pie mighty well, but eggs is skeerce an' he has to be satisfied wid pure water and win' pud-din'."

"Can he kick?" cried another after the laughter had subsided.

"Kick?" echoed the ancient ducky. "Now you'se comin' down to his 'complishments—now you tech him in a tender spot!" and the old negro grinned as if the question was a rare compliment. "Gemmen, you won't believe me when I tell you 'bout de 'lectricity dat's in dat mule's heels. When he slings dem hind feet it means good-mornin' to any libing being dat comes in contract wid dem heels. I'll jist show you what dat ole rascal done to me. He kinder got angry at me once and he layed for me to get even. Eb'ry time dat I went near his hin' feet I could see him laffing to hisself and gettin' ready to turn on de steam for de hin' part ob de machinery; but I always fooled him by putting him in de stable wid his tail to de manger and his head whar de heels ought to be, yah! yah! yah! Dat ole fool didn't know de difference for a long time until one night he dropped on de racket and changed 'round—puttin' de heels jist whar dey ought to be. I kim along in de dark and opened de doah, and I nebber 'spected anyting 'tall. All ob a sudden I felt somet'ing like a arquake hit me on de chist and in de stummick, and I saw all kinds of blazes fer a minnit; den I didn't know nuffing at all. I felt somet'ing drap and I looked 'round and found dat it was me. I was jist a haff a mile from de house. Now you talk 'bout de force ob a mule's leg, dar's proof, gemmen, dat he can raise you if you want to be raised. But he 'poligized for dat, and we'se good fren's now. He's losing his grip—but he was some punkins in de days when he sailed wid ole Noah in his ship."

The old ducky regarded the mule with pride as he concluded the recital and the dismal brute made a feeble attempt to bray, but the effort died away in its antiquated throat.

"No use," said the old fellow, tenderly; "Goliath is a losing his voice."

"Say! look here, old nigger, where do you live?" demanded a red-shirted individual, who had remained a silent listener of the old negro's remarks.

"I libs jest a mile an' a haff outside ob town on Marse Freeman's p ace. I'se jest come in to get some pervisions fer de ole woman; but, what's up, gemmen? Is dar gwine to be a military precession? I see you'se all got de guns out."

The old negro received no reply to this question for the same red-shirted fellow again interrogated him.

"Look here, old nigger; you've got things mixed. Freeman has left the diggings and gone to Leadville—"

"I knows dat, but I'se keepin' house fer him. Me an' de ole woman's got charge ob de place while Marse Freeman is gone," returned the old ducky, pleasantly.

"Boys, I know that voice! I've heard it once, and in spite of the disguise and cracked tones of the voice I know the man seated on that mule!"

The speaker brought his rifle to a position on a level with the old negro's head.

"Who is it?" roared several men in the group.

"Ebony Dan!"

As the words were uttered by the red-shirted person, the old negro's hands were withdrawn from his ragged garments; and, quick as the lightning's stroke, there appeared in each hand a polished revolver that spat out a tongue of flame, the instant that the weapons came into view. Even as the man uttered the name of Ebony Dan he gave vent to a screech of pain and flung his rifle down as he fell back with a bullet imbedded in his brain.

"Go it, Goliath!" yelled the negro and the mule sprang forward with the speed of the wind.

CHAPTER IX.

"OUT OF THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE."

It was strange to witness the wonderful speed developed by the remarkable animal that dashed away at the word of command. The negro sat erect in the saddle and with his weapons baled away at every one who sought to intercept him in his flight. Before the crowd had fully realized his intentions Ebony Dan had gained full twenty yards in the exciting chase that now ensued. From each side of the street came a rattling discharge of firearms as the cry was passed from mouth to mouth:

"There goes Ebony Dan!"

The mere name of the dreaded road-agent had often occasioned excitement as his bold deeds were recounted, but now that the identical personage was in full view and in the midst of armed men, the excitement bordered upon frenzy. It seemed as if Ebony Dan and his odd-looking steed bore charmed lives as the marksmen aimed wildly in their nervous haste. The bullets failed to intercept the flight of the mule and its intrepid rider. Even those who sprung out in advance to bar the way met with poor success and either went down before the unerring aim of the fugitive or were hurled aside by the wonderful animal. One rough specimen of humanity managed to seize one of the long ears of the mule and to his utter amazement the ear remained in his grasp while the animal dashed onward. One glance revealed the fraud. The ear was but a cunning imitation and composed of a species of card-board and felt.

The trick was now apparent, Ebony Dan was mounted upon a fleet horse which he had cunningly daubed with a whitish clay and decked out to resemble a wee-begone mule, by fixing the bogus ears and trimming the tail of superfluous hair. It was a clever trick and the discoverer of the bogus ear rolled into the mud, heels over head, while grasping his trophy.

The alarm spread throughout the whole town; but the advantage gained by Ebony Dan at the outset was decidedly in his favor, for he kept his pursuers at a distance during the exciting chase. Straight as an arrow in its flight the outlaw dashed along and was rapidly nearing the rugged masses of rock forming the outskirts of the town.

"The devil seems to protect his own!" cried a miner who had just leveled and discharged his weapon at the fugitive. He turned away with a look of dissatisfaction at the failure of the shot and joined in the yelling throng.

The way became rugged and a deep gully ran parallel with the main trail.

Ebony Dan directed his steed into the gully and gave the animal free rein. A loud shout broke from the crowd in pursuit as they deemed the chase at an end and the capture of the road-agent certain. Several old shanties occupied the lower end of this gully, and toward one of these Ebony Dan urged his now panting steed.

When within a few feet of the shanty he leaped from the saddle and gave the horse a sharp blow at the same time exclaiming, "Now then—make for home!"

The brute leaped forward like a bolt from a cross-bow and in a moment it had disappeared in the intricate windings of the gully. Ebony Dan dashed toward the nearest cabin, and, a moment later, had passed into the building and barred the door. An old negress was just in the act of descending through a trap in the rough floor in order to reach the cellar.

Ebony Dan was beside the trap in the twinkling of an eye and pushed the astonished negress into the dark cellar and closed the trap. A heavy chest stood in one corner of the room and the young road agent quickly dragged the heavy box directly over the trap in order to prevent the wench from raising the barrier. All this had been accomplished in less time than it has taken to describe it. A colored dress hung upon the wall, and the hunted man had quickly removed his coat and placed the

dress upon his own person. Next, he placed a pair of brass spectacles upon his nose and tied a fantastic bandanna 'kerchief about his head, at the same time dashing aside the tuft of wool that ornamented his chin.

A tattered woolen shawl that lay upon a rickety chair enabled him to add to his appearance and present a remarkable counterfeit of the old wench imprisoned in the cellar.

Even as he presented this speedy metamorphosis the footfalls of his pursuers were almost at the door of the shanty.

Ebony Dan leaped to the door and unbarred it, and at the same time giving vent to a series of wild screeches.

The door was flung open violently and a dozen armed men appeared on the threshold.

"Hello, old woman, what's the matter with you?" yelled the foremost.

"O, lordy—lordy! I'se skeered to deff. De debbil's been here! De debbil is here, sure!"

Ebony Dan again gave vent to a series of screeches and appeared to be trembling with terror.

"Where's the nigger that ran into this house? Come, no dodging the question—where is he?"

And the interrogator displayed his revolver in a threatening manner.

"Wasn't it de debbil, sure 'nuff?" queried the seeming wench, in tones of surprise. "Was dat a real live common nigger?"

"Yes—w'ere is he?"

"I'se got him! I'se got him safe!"

"Where is he? Speak, or I'll see if I can bring you to your senses."

"Hold on, gemmen; I'll tell you! I was jest here getting ready for to go down de cellar when somet'ing like a man—I t'ought it was de debbil—ran past me and gib me a lick 'long side ob de jaw and ran down into de cellar. Phew! I smelled brimstone after dat. Jest as soon as he got down into de cellar I rolled dat chest right a-top ob de trap-door, and if he is a real common nigger he's down in de cellar yit. If he is de debbil you might as well look for a needle in de hay-stack!"

The Regulators waited to hear no more. One and all dashed toward the chest and flung it aside and opened the trap.

"Look sharp there! The villain is armed, and will pepper some of us unless we wing him."

The speaker paused, for a deep groan came from the depths of the cellar.

"He's there, boys, and if I'm not much mistaken some of our bullets hit him. Hear him groan! He can't do ary mischief. Who'll follow me?"

"All of us!" cried the group.

"Ebony Dan, surrender and we'll deal easy with you," cried the foremost Regulator as he descended the trap.

A groan was the only answer and the men quickly descended into the dark cellar.

As the last one was half-way down the steps the apparently terrified wench bounded forward and dealt the unsuspecting fellow a blow that sent him headlong among his companions below. Then Ebony Dan closed the trap and dragged the chest over the spot. A moment later he had dashed out through the small window overlooking a precipitous part of the gully. Not a moment too soon was escape in that direction accomplished, for the balance of the pursuing party surrounded the front part of the building while a number rushed into the room just vacated by the road-agent.

A wild yell told the fugitive that the trick was discovered and that the chase would begin anew. He leaped from bowlder to bowlder carefully concealing himself behind the masses as he sped along.

The road that he was pursuing would bring him into the locality of Hell Gate, and once in that vicinity he could easily evade his enemies.

The deepening shadows of night favored his flight, although he knew that the Regulators were on his trail by the confused sound of

voices proceeding from the upper part of the gully. Suddenly a shrill signal sounded from the lower part of the ravine, apparently not a dozen rods from the spot where Ebony Dan had momentarily halted. Another detachment had entered the gully and were coming from the very direction that Ebony Dan hoped to find unguarded! In a moment the signal was answered from the locality of the shanties. The road-agent dropped down behind a huge rock and he saw the shadowy forms of the lynchers pass within ten feet of his hiding-place.

He arose and crept forward again rapidly, casting away the old dress and shawl as he progressed and removing the gray wig and spectacles.

Aided by the darkness he reached the confines of the gully and sped away into the wilderness of stunted bushes and rocks. He could hear the clamor of many voices, but distance soon caused the sounds of pursuit to die out altogether.

Several hours later he stood within the portals of the dismal precincts of Hell Gate. He had just given vent to an expression of relief and satisfaction when a score of figures seemed to arise from the very earth and he was hemmed in by a circle of leveled revolvers.

CHAPTER X.

THE HISSING OF THE SERPENT.

The glitter of polished steel and the ominous figures told Ebony Dan that he was surrounded by foes.

"Halt!" exclaimed one of the men; "the least movement and we'll riddle you like an old target!"

Ebony Dan recognized the voice and the man. It was Sid Wilson, the lieutenant of Bolton's league. Before the black road-agent could offer the least resistance several of the bandits sprung upon him and in a moment his hands were secured by several lurchers.

"Well, I reckon I'm in a tight fix," said Dan calmly, "but I've got to make de best ob it. I gibs you credit for laying me out dis way; I ought to had my eyes peeled."

"The capt'n will be mighty pleased to see you," declared Wilson; "he's been in bad humor for several days, but one look at your black face will set him to grinning."

"Yas, dat's a fac'; I may set him to grinning before he knows it," replied Ebony Dan. "But now, boys, dat you've got dis chile, what's de next thing on de bill ob fare?"

"Well, we're so glad to have you in our company that we're going to take you up to our roost in the Buzzard mountains," answered Wilson, "and I reckon, my black pilgrim, that you'll be pleased with your reception. We had no idea that we'd trap you so easily. We knew that you lit out for Silver Circle, under false colors, and we were watching for your return. I reckon we'll have a finger in the pie when the next treasure-box comes through Hell Gate—eh, boys? Ha! ha! ha!"

Wilson laughed boisterously, for he felt elated over his capture. The taking of Ebony Dan would be a tremendous feather in his cap. It would make him popular with the league for he had accomplished what Bolton had failed to perform. It would be an easy matter to dispose of Bully Bolton and proclaim himself the head center of their band. It was this scheme that caused Wilson to be unusually good-natured and affable when in company with members of the banditti.

Ebony Dan did not show the least sign of discomfiture; on the contrary he laughed and joked during the journey through the wild mountain passes while the outlaws carefully guarded against a rescue.

They momentarily expected to see the black riders rise from behind projecting rocks and swoop down upon them and rescue their leader. Mile after mile passed and the bandits gradually drew nearer to their stronghold and banished all thought of losing their prisoner.

At last they had secured the man who had wrought disaster to the league and almost dis-

persed it. The scenes of the midnight attack were yet fresh in their minds and the blood of comrades cried for vengeance. No wonder that this rough crew were in excellent spirits and that one of the number ran ahead to inform the down-hearted members in the retreat of the streak of good luck attending Wilson's scouting-party.

Bolton had selected an excellent retreat for his lawless crew. A chain of rugged hills encircled the tract of land occupied by the log houses of the outlaws. The only access to this retreat was through a natural gateway formed of towering rocks. A mere handful of armed men could hold an army in check, and should they penetrate into the defile, the bandits could destroy the attacking party by hurling down huge blocks upon the heads of their foes. Bolton had certainly picked out a stronghold for the desperadoes who made it their home. A large number of horses and horned cattle roamed about the inclosure, the proceeds of many raids and stampedes.

When the scouting party reached the gateway they found the members of the league assembled in groups and evidently in a great state of excitement. The capture of Ebony Dan was an unlooked-for event and the theme of conversation.

The early dawn had brought abundant reasons for a jollification.

A few moments previous to the coming of Wilson and his prisoner, Bolton had ridden into the inclosure with his fair captive, Eleanor Mason.

It was the first time that the desperadoes had ever looked upon the features of their dreaded foe and now that he was safe in their hands their joy knew no bounds and Sid Wilson was the lion of the hour. The ruffian sought the hut occupied by the bandit leader and a cordial greeting passed between them.

It was plain to be seen that Bolton did not know of Ebony Dan's capture, for the outlaw chief had sought his cabin after seeing Eleanor placed in a secure chamber.

"What luck, Cap?" asked Wilson, carelessly.

Bolton smiled, showing his wolfish teeth, as he replied:

"Best in the world! I've succeeded famously. Thanks to your promptness in sending help when I needed it badly. Eleanor Mason is a captive in my hands."

"Indeed! I'm glad to hear it. I have a prisoner also!" said Wilson, indifferently.

"You? Who is it?"

"Ebony Dan!"

Bolton leaped as if he had been bitten by an adder. Then he darted forward, and fixing his cold gray eyes upon Wilson's said, sternly:

"Don't trifle with me, Sid! Did you say Ebony Dan, or did the fiend whisper it in my ear?"

"I am not trifling with you, Cap! I tell you again that I have bagged your bugbear, and the scourge of the mining regions. The nigger is trapped and is now in our keeping."

Bolton uttered a wild yell of triumph as Wilson concluded, and he grasped that worthy's hand and wrung it cordially. "Once again we are masters of the silver regions!" he cried, vehemently. "Once again the treasure-boxes will fall into our hands without opposition. I feared this black devil more than a thousand Vigilantes, and now that he is in our hands I could dance for joy. Wilson, you're a brick, and you deserve to be rewarded."

If the arch-villain could have read what was passing in Wilson's mind at that moment he would have struck him dead at his feet. Wilson's reward had been fixed by that individual himself. It was to dispatch Bolton, and assume control of the league! He felt sure of the majority of the lawless crew, for he had poisoned them against Bolton, and the conspiracy only lacked a favorable opportunity to show itself and strike the blow.

Wilson was a cunning rogue and was daily growing in favor with the desperadoes who admired his reckless courage and bravado.

"I must go and see this fellow, at once," declared Bolton, "and after I have interviewed him I'll prepare to send him to his home in the sulphur regions. I never prayed for a person's death so ardently as I have wished for this nigger's, and to think that I am to be his judge and executioner! Oh! the reward for patient waiting is too great. I could shout for joy!"

Bolton sought the log hut occupied by the distinguished prisoner and soon was in the presence of Ebony Dan.

Several bandits, well-armed, guarded the entrance, and watched the bound man. Ebony Dan smiled as he saw his visitor and a low chuckle escaped from his lips.

"So, so, my blackbird; you're caged at last! Do you remember the last time we met? Do you remember the words you used to me? The tables are turned now and your very seconds are numbered."

"Well, dat's some consolation," confessed Dan. "If you've got dem numbered you'd better keep good 'count ob dem. I admit dat de tables is turned clear 'round but I reckon as how dey is on a pivot and will swing 'round once more."

"Don't delude yourself with any hope of escape. I have longed for this day and it has dawned at last. The rival leagues of Silver Circle will no longer exist. If you had a hundred lives I'd torture every one of them from your carcass and enjoy your sufferings and laugh at your cries of agony!"

"Dat's very kind ob you."

"Do you know what death I have selected for you?"

"Deed I doesn't, and it don't worry me a blame bit!"

Bolton felt his blood tingling with anger. He would have struck down his helpless captive but he had marked out a death of tortures for him. It was with difficulty that he smothered his rage and again addressed Ebony Dan, but his voice resembled the hissing sound of a coiled snake preparing to strike.

"I'll enlighten you: I'm going to repay you for all the trouble you have caused me and my followers. Your black riders have hunted me without mercy and I'll crush their leader as though he were but a worm under my heel."

"You'll find me a good lively worm," replied Ebony Dan. "I've got as many lives as a cat and I'm worth a hundred dead niggers. Don't blow about what you've gwine to do—but do it! Ebony Dan never takes water, but he's solid to de last moment."

"I'll put you to the test sooner than you expect," retorted Bolton savagely. "Do you remember the young lady that I had taken into my care and whom you rescued from my hands? Well, it's a strange coincidence truly, for she is here a captive like yourself."

"Eleanor Mason?"

"Yes, Eleanor Mason! How the deuce did you know her name?"

"I don't know; I reckon I must 'a' heard it dat night."

There was something in the tone that struck Bolton; and he noticed also that a tremor seemed to pass through the frame of the black outlaw. It was with an effort that he maintained his composure, and the lynx-eyed ruffian noted that, also, for he exclaimed:

"The news of her capture does not please you?"

A strange gleam shot from the negro's eyes and his lips quivered, but he made no reply.

"I'm in rare good luck," added Bolton, "for I've needed a rich wife and now I can say that I've secured one."

A low sob proceeded from the adjoining apartment. Ebony Dan peered through the chinks in the logs forming the partition, and was enabled to see the occupant of the next chamber. It was Eleanor Mason!

A low groan arose to his lips.

Why should the captivity of the beautiful girl affect the negro in this manner? Was not his own life in peril?

Ebony Dan was on the point of addressing his visitor when Bolton again spoke.

"You are satisfied that I have spoken truly. She is in the next room; but, time is fleeting. I will prepare you for your exit to the unknown world. Here, Luke, and you Bailey—bring an armful of dry twigs."

Two of the bandits who had joined the guards at the door departed to obtain the inflammable material.

"Now, Ebony Dan, I propose to build a fire upon your bosom, directly over your heart and slowly torture you to death."

CHAPTER XI.

NIPPED IN THE BUD.

WHEN Bolton dashed away with his fair burden the bandits allowed their steeds to drop a considerable distance behind the road-agent and his captive. The moment she was fairly seated before him, the villain had quickly applied a kerchief saturated with a powerful drug to her nostrils. This prevented an outcry, and his prisoner lay passive as a sleeping child upon his bosom. Bolton selected the roughest trail in order to avoid any parties that might be traveling to or from Silver Circle.

After traversing a stream that marked a dozen miles' ride from the mining town, Bolton halted his panting steed and allowed his followers to join him.

"It's all right," said he; "no danger of pursuit. We're a dozen miles away and our way is clear to the mountain. The plan has worked to perfection. Why did Sid Wilson remain at the stronghold instead of coming back to me?"

"I don't know, Cap," responded one of the horsemen—"that is, I don't know for certain. I heard Sid speaking of an expedition to Hell Gate, and he picked out a gang to take with him. He gave us our instructions, and then lit out with his lads."

Bolton ground his teeth with rage. Wilson was becoming decidedly bold. He no longer consulted his chief, but acted upon his own responsibility in many desperate cases.

Bolton did not fail to note that his lieutenant was all-powerful among a certain clique forming part of the league. Inwardly he resolved to remove Wilson at the first favorable opportunity. He rode along, almost forgetting that he bore a senseless form before him, and was not aware of Eleanor's presence until she gave vent to a low sigh.

The cool night wind had revived her, and at the same time broken the road-agent's unpleasant reverie. She fixed her large blue eyes upon his forbidding features, but with a shudder, she closed them again.

"Ah! you are awake!" cried Bolton. "That's right! make no attempt to evade me or to cry out and you are perfectly safe. Do you recognize me? Do you not remember the little old man that rode in the coach? Do you forget the exciting scene that followed and how I had you in my care?"

"I do remember—I also vividly remember the black champion that took me from you," she replied. Something like an oath broke from Bolton's lips as the girl mentioned his formidable rival.

"That scene is not to be repeated," said he savagely; "in a very short time you will be in my retreat and surrounded by a reckless crew who will form a living barrier between you and the outer world. I have a proposition to make. You are at liberty to accept or refuse as the consequences are inevitable. You are probably aware that I hold a sword above your father's head. One word from me and he is doomed to a felon's death."

He paused a few moments as if to note the effects of his words, but the fair girl had yet vouchsafed no reply or betrayed any emotion.

"I said, that one word from me would suffice to destroy your father. You can save him by becoming mine. I have loved you, fair Eleanor, long before you ever gazed upon me. I am rich and you shall have all that

your fancy can suggest. I will leave this wild country and depart for another clime. I will—"

"Cease! I will hear no more," interrupted Eleanor with flashing eyes and recoiling from the ruffian as though he was as poisonous as the deadly viper. "Speak not of love to me. Were you rich as the combined kingdoms of the world you could never purchase my love. I have loved but once and my heart will remain loyal until it is stilled by the angel of death. Although I love my father, his safety can never be purchased by such a sacrifice and with such as you!"

"Such as me?" repeated Bolton, vaguely.

"Yes, an outlaw—a villain. You have torn me from my home only to threaten me and force me to come to such terms as you offer. But, let me tell you that, to my dying moment, my answer will still be the same, and you will find that I have a will of my own—a will that you can never alter."

"A very pretty speech," sneered Bolton; "it's quite dramatic; 'pon my word you should have been an actress. In spite of your will, and your emphatic language, you will find that I am not to be put off so easily. Remember that I can use force if it becomes necessary."

"I do not doubt it. That would be in keeping with your honor and courage. You are a brave man and worthy of any noble woman's love!" and the brave little girl concluded by uttering a mocking laugh that went to Bolton's heart as though each sound was a venomous arrow. He quailed before his pretty captive.

The road-agent rode along in silence, brooding over this unlooked-for defeat. He had anticipated tears, and supplications, and then a delay of several days. Instead of this she boldly defied him and even mocked him. He did not expect that the sweet-faced girl would give him the least trouble, but now found that he had caged a young lioness and one not easily tamed.

The confines of the mountain retreat were soon passed and the little cavalcade entered the inclosure. Only a few guards were at the entrance and these paid no attention to the outlaw chief and his captive.

Bolton led the way to a log hut and secured his prisoner by locking both doors. The heavy oak door leading outward, and the stout door in the partition. Before leaving her presence he again assured her that she would soon be his wife and that escape was impossible, therefore to be prepared for an early ceremony.

When she heard the key grating in the lock her courage forsook her and she burst into a flood of tears. She murmured the name of the man she loved and implored Heaven to send him to her assistance. With her hands clasped in prayer she seemed to be wafted slowly into dreamland.

She was awakened from this reverie, or slumber, by hearing the confused hum of voices in the next room. She peered through the crevices and distinctly saw the hated features of the robber chieftain. She also saw the black countenance of the mysterious person who had interposed in her behalf when Bolton had attempted to carry her away from the coach. She started nervously. One glance sufficed to reveal that Ebony Dan was a prisoner in the hands of the human wolf who had abducted her.

Strange that her heart bled for the black captive, and that within its depths was an inexpressible yearning or longing to be at his side.

The orb of day shed a faint light into the two apartments, and through the wide chinks in the log partition Eleanor was enabled to see all that transpired, and hear every word spoken.

The shadows were chased away by the early sunrise, thus enabling our heroine to note everything in the adjacent room.

She was horrified to hear the villain order his minions to produce the dry combustibles to carry out the dreadful fate decreed upon the prisoner. Ebony Dan was bound in such a

manner that he could not offer the slightest resistance.

As Eleanor peered through the barrier of logs she espied the heavy "six-shooters" of the bandit leader lying upon the small table.

Bolton had removed them from his belt in order to handle his captive easily and escape injury from the premature explosion of the firearms. The two weapons lay upon the table within easy reach of the outlaw's hands.

Even as she descried the revolvers the two bandits returned with a mass of light and dry twigs.

At their heels came several scowling ruffians headed by Sid Wilson, and full twenty more thronged the narrow doorway to obtain a peep of the horrible execution about to be enacted upon one hated and feared. Several burly ruffians seized the negro and after a brief struggle he was laid prostrate upon the earthen floor of the hut.

"Shall we bare his bosom?" demanded Wilson.

"No; just place a mass of twigs directly over his heart and one of you can feed the flames. Now, Ebony Dan," said he, addressing his helpless foe, "your time has arrived and a horrible death awaits you! Have you anything to say?"

"Only jess dis! Remember dat Edward Carson still lives and will some day demand justice. I'm all O. K., for I'll be avenged by my riders. Go ahead wid de picnic! Start de bonfire."

Ebony Dan's eyes swept the assemblage as he spoke and in that searching glance he saw one face that expressed volumes. A quick motion of the hand followed, and the man mingling with Bolton's crew disappeared from the negro gaze.

"Bring that torch and apply it to the twigs," yelled Bolton.

An outlaw stepped forth with a blazing pine knot which he had just ignited and for a moment he hovered over the prostrate form of Ebony Dan.

Eleanor was about to shriek when her eyes rested upon an ax in a corner of the room. A moment later it was in her grasp and with one well directed blow she shattered the door in the partition and sprang into the room—directly into the circle of amazed ruffians. Bolton leaped back as if a bolt from Heaven had exploded at his feet and the outlaw with the torch paused while yet the flame of the pine knot scorched the twigs upon Ebony Dan's bosom. Eleanor reached forth and grasped Bolton's revolvers and thrust them full into the baffled villain's face.

CHAPTER XII.

BETWEEN TWO FIRES.

BOLTON'S first thought was of his weapons but when he saw them in the grasp of the resolute maiden he uttered a yell of rage.

"Move hand or foot and assure as there is a hereafter I'll kill you in your tracks. Do not tempt me to stain my soul with the crime of murder, for I have determined that either you or I will perish and at present the odds are in my favor," cried Eleanor.

She looked surpassingly lovely as she stood near the shattered door, one pistol leveled at Bolton and the remaining weapon pointed at Sid Wilson and his ruffians.

Her closed lips and flashing eyes corroborated the statement that she was determined, and the rascally crew needed no second warning. The little figure held the burly ruffians in check for full five minutes before one of their number moved or spoke. In that space of time some one had stooped over Ebony Dan and severed the ropes binding his limbs. In the confusion that ensued the liberator was not discovered, although he was among the banditti at that moment under range of Eleanor's weapons. To Bolton's intense surprise Ebony Dan leaped to his feet, free from the ropes which he had cast aside, and the daring sable road-agent now stood beside his beauti-

ful rescuer. He gently took one of the weapons from her grasp and faced the circle.

"De first man dat moves but an inch I'll drop him!" them turning to Eleanor in a low thrilling voice he added: "take your ax and shatter de lock ob de door in de next room and make your escape; I will follow you."

In a moment she was gone and the dull thud of the ax told the negro that the brave little lady was forcing an exit in that direction. He heard the sound of the broken lock as it rattled to the earth and he leaped back into the adjoining room, closely followed by the villain group. Ebony Dan reached the outer door just as Bolton and his followers came through the opening in the partition. The negro raised his pistol and a quick report followed. A yell of pain told that the bullet had found a victim and the remainder were momentarily thrown into confusion.

Ebony Dan was soon beside Eleanor, and the twain hastened toward the only outlet from the inclosure. Once and once only had Bolton signaled for assistance and those who responded had hastened to the front part of the log building.

This proved to be a most fortunate occurrence, for it allowed Ebony Dan and the girl to reach the natural gateway without fear of interception by those wont to guard that exit.

But the outlaw horde came like a pack of hounds in full cry and were gaining on the fugitives when they dashed into the narrow chasm forming the outlet.

"Quick, captain, quick!" said a voice, and the next moment a man attired in a similar manner to Bolton's gang stepped forth from behind a gigantic mass of rock and led a horse into view.

Quick as a flash the man disappeared into a deep cleft and was lost to view. A moment later Ebony Dan had vaulted into the saddle and the heroic maid was again borne away but this time she was a willing captive.

A terrific chorus of wild shouts and the crack of firearms told the escaping couple that the ruffians had witnessed the act and were manifesting their rage and disappointment.

"Horses! Horses and follow in pursuit!" howled Bolton. "There's a traitor among us, but we can't lose time to ferret him out now. Horses and away after that black devil. The fiends of darkness are conspiring against us and our safety lies in killing that escaping nigger!"

While Bolton and his men dashed pell-mell into the inclosure to procure their horses, Ebony Dan made good use of this respite. He urged the steed forward and was soon in the intricate windings of the pass, while a distant clattering of hoofs and faint shouts told that the human wolves were on the trail.

"Don't lose your courage, miss," whispered the negro; "I think we can keep dem at a considerable distance. Dis is a swift nag, and once we get into de level country dey might as well try to catch de wind."

"How fortunate you were to secure a horse at the critical moment! Tell me, was it a friend that cut your bonds and furnished the horse?"

"Well, I reckon dat he wasn't an enemy or he wouldn't run sich a risk—would he?"

"Well, no; I wondered who it was, because you are black and the person was a white man," said Eleanor hesitatingly, but Ebony Dan quickly replied to her question in a good-humored manner:

"I understand what you mean, miss. De man was one of my riders. You see, I have my men here, there and everywhere. Some ob dem right 'mong Bolton's league."

"But he was not black! He was white."

"Yes, sometimes, but—"

Ebony Dan paused and turned the subject of conversation as if unwilling to impart further information. He electrified the fair girl by his next exclamation.

"Edward Carson was seen in Silver Circle a few nights ago!"

Eleanor uttered a glad cry and her face became suffused with blushes.

"Then he has not departed from this State?"

"No; he could not go wid a stain upon his character, and such a stain!" Ebony Dan shook his head sadly. "He ventured into town just to obtain one look at de house dat sheltered de one he loved so much! Perhaps he expected to look upon her face. But he was disappointed and came mighty near falling into de hands ob de Regulators in de bargain."

Tears came into Eleanor's eyes and her lips quivered with emotion.

"You have seen him—you know him?" she queried, turning to her sable companion.

"Yes, I know him. I know how madly he loves you. I know dat it is to prove dat love and his innocence dat he still remains here and imperils his life, day after day. If he believed you was constant to him, he would gladly bear de burden."

"Constant to him!" she cried, vehemently; "I have never doubted him—I love him too well. I believe him guiltless though the world should condemn him. Tell him that Eleanor Mason is true to the love plighted in those happy days, and, come what may, she will cling to Edward Carson to the bitter end."

Ebony Dan made a movement as though he would clasp her hand within his own, but, ere he could do so, the rattling of wheels in the ravine below came to his ears, and at the same moment the shouts of his pursuers sounded startlingly near. Turning in the saddle he discovered the cavalcade of bandits dashing down the precipitous path.

Ebony Dan saw that Bolton and his ruffians had gained upon him during the time he was listening to Eleanor's voice and replying to her questions. He spoke to the horse and the noble beast again dashed forward. The coach that Ebony Dan had descried was journeying toward Hell Gate, coming from Silver Circle.

The negro understood the situation at once. Bolton was endeavoring to overtake his captives and intercept the coach, for it conveyed a valuable lot of bullion. Ebony Dan had received information concerning this very coach, but, owing to the unexpected turn of affairs following the intelligence, he had almost forgotten the valuable convoy. He doubted not but Bolton and his league knew of the treasure also.

The day-coach was not easily surprised and plundered, therefore the bullion was expressed upon the vehicle that was now speeding toward the western entrance of the "infernal passage."

Bolton and his followers discovered the coach almost as soon as Ebony Dan had listened to the sound of its wheels. The outlaw band sped onward toward the gloomy ravine in order to hem in the vehicle by dividing the bandit horde—Bolton heading one party and Sid Wilson leading the remainder.

"Now, boys, make for the coach!" cried Bolton; "we've got a clean sweep at it—bullion enough aboard in that coach to enrich the entire league. Let Ebony Dan go. We'll track him after we get through with the coach."

Ebony Dan and his lovely companion disappeared in the towering masses, forming the outskirts of the gulch, while the two groups of mounted bandits swept to the eastern and western terminus of the long gloomy ravine.

The coach was just rolling over the bridge spanning the roaring torrent, when the road-agents, headed by Bully Bolton, suddenly dashed into view and drew up before the startled horses attached to the vehicle.

"Halt!" cried Bolton, "You're hemmed in on all sides. Down with that bullion!"

Crack! crack!

From the interior of the coach came the rifle-shots, and two of Bolton's band pitched headlong from their horses.

"Now, boys, give it to them!" cried a powerful fellow who leaped from the coach, followed by eight or nine armed men. It was the sheriff of the county and a detachment of Reg-

ulators. The outlaws poured a murderous fire into the defenders of the coach, who, being well protected by the body of the vehicle the bandits merely wasted their lead, while the Regulators did terrible work with their repeating rifles. A hoarse yell echoed through the ravine. The cry was answered by the ruffians who were almost on the point of retreat.

Sid Wilson and his cutthroats were coming to the rescue of their fellow-ruffians and the defenders of the treasure-coach were placed between two fires.

Bolton shouted to his disheartened followers and the cravens again dashed toward the little band of Regulators while Sid Wilson's riders came like the wind to sweep aside the handful of defenders as though they were autumn leaves in the path of the storm.

The sheriff fought like a Trojan, cheering on the few men at his command by deeds of valor. Strange to relate, Spencer Mason was one of the number forming the escort. As he owned a large share of the treasure he had joined the party to defend his wealth. A growl of anger burst from Bolton's lips as he descried Mason among the e-cort and he fired several ineffectual shots at the mine-owner.

Finally the Regulators were completely hemmed in and Bolton dashed forward, riding down the sheriff who opposed the way. The ruffian had just raised his revolver to the sheriff's head and his finger was pressing the trigger when the weapon was sent out of his hand whizzing through the air.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD SCORES ARE WIPED OUT.

ONE look at the person who had delivered the blow forced a cry from Bolton's lips—A cry resembling the utterance of a wild beast wounded to the death.

The sheriff fixed his eyes upon his rescuer and quickly exclaimed, "Ebony Dan, you've saved my life! You're a brick!"

The black outlaw scarcely heard the words, for he was riding into the group of bandits, scattering them to and fro. Spencer Mason took refuge behind the coach and discharged several shots at Bolton. But the scoundrel seemed to bear a charmed life.

Again and again the little band of Vigilantes rallied but were surely losing ground before the onslaught of the furious road-agents.

Ebony Dan had disappeared almost as instantaneously as he had appeared upon the scene.

"Now then, boys! You've got them dead to rights," yelled Bolton. "Down with them—no quarter—spare none!"

A wild yell broke from each whiskered ruffian and the combined mass of banditti swept down to annihilate the Vigilantes crouched behind the coach and horses.

But, ere they reached their intended victims, the clattering of hoofs upon the flinty surface of the trail came to the ears of both the assailants and the assailed.

The very next moment a swarm of black figures, with dusky faces, and mounted upon coal-black steeds, dashed into the very midst of Bolton's outlaws; then a sheet of flame seemed to flash from the weapons held in the grasp of the sable riders. Not a word—not a sound from the somber horsemen, but the crack, crack of their weapons, and the howls from stricken men told that death and destruction followed the aim of the silent riders.

"Ebony Dan's riders!" shrieked Bolton and he turned to escape.

His horse stumbled and rolled over upon its side, hurling the bandit leader to the hard earth. Before he could arise he was in the grasp of the sheriff and his men. With a bitter curse Bolton strove to free himself but a cocked pistol held to his temple soon quieted him.

He uttered a groan of despair for he saw his outlaw crew in full retreat while the dark riders were following like hounds upon the track of a fugitive fox.

A moment later Bully Bolton was secured

and stood among his captors with a defiant smile upon his lips and fear in his heart. His face suddenly blanched, for he saw one of the Vigilantes producing a rope and the road-agent knew full well the import of that piece of hemp.

"Bolton, we've got you at last," announced the sheriff, "and we'll rid the trail of your presence. You see that rope? Well, it is intended for you, and you've got just four minutes to prepare yourself, for we're going to swing you off without judge or jury."

Bolton's eyes swept the group that encircled him and he fixed his gaze upon Spencer Mason.

"Do you hear that?" said he to the mine-owner—"they're about to hang me. I've got your pretty daughter in my care, and if I'm strung up you'll never see her alive again."

Mason did not reply, but turned away as if to avoid the outlaw chief.

"Stop!" thundered Bolton; "I want you to listen to me, Spencer Mason."

"Silence, ruffian! Do not address me in such a familiar manner. Strig him up, sheriff; his crimes demand speedy justice."

Spencer Mason's words were approved by the group of Vigilantes, and one of their number soon had the noose fixed about Bolton's neck while another threw the long end of the rope over the stout branch of a tree growing almost directly over the spot where Bolton had been captured.

"Spencer Mason, are you going to save me?" cried Bolton, savagely.

"Save you?" retorted the mine-owner. "Why should I save you? We all know your crimes—"

"Ay, and the men around you will soon know yours!"

"String him up!" roared Mason.

"Stop! Gentlemen, before hanging me I have a few words to say. You all remember the murder of John Mason. You listened to Spencer's story and almost lynched Edward Carson for the crime. Gentlemen, Edward Carson was an innocent man for—I struck the fatal blow; I was one of the murderers and there stands my accomplice!"

Bolton pointed to Spencer Mason whose face turned ghastly and his lips refused to move although he strove to speak.

"Yes, I accuse Spencer Mason of murdering his brother in order to secure valuable claims and deeds, and to obtain the wealth that John Mason had accumulated. There stands the guilty wretch; let him deny it if he can. He brought Eleanor Mason to these regions and keeps her in ignorance of her real parentage and fortune. I say that I am as guilty as he is, but not more so, and that I have spoken truly let God be my witness!"

"It is a lie," gasped Spencer Mason, in a husky voice.

"He speaks the truth!" cried a clear ringing voice, and from the mass of boulders came a form well known to the assemblage. It was Ebony Dan!

The black road-agent strode into the midst of the circle and faced the mine-owner and the damned bandit. "Although I have no love for Bolton and I have trailed him for vengeance, I must say that he speaks the truth!"

Ebony Dan's voice was no longer the peculiar accents of the negro and the mannerisms of the Ethiopian were laid aside.

"I also charge Spencer Mason with being the murderer of his brother, John, and I accuse him of perjury in accusing Edward Carson and delivering him into the hands of the Vigilantes in order to shield himself. He has wealth that belongs to John Mason's child, and if justice were done, he would now be side by side with Bolton, and hang from the same limb."

"You—speak—falsely!" declared Spencer, slowly. "How do you know all this—who are you?"

"Edward Carson!"

Ebony Dan rolled up his sleeves as he spoke and bared his bosom. The clear white skin

appeared to view and the wig of woolly hair was cast aside.

Spencer Mason sunk to the earth in a fainting condition and a small stream of dark blood flowed from his lips.

Even as Ebony Dan announced himself as Edward Carson the thrilling scream of a woman echoed from the side of the ravine and Eleanor Mason sprang forward and was clasped in the arms of the speaker.

"My darling—my darling!" murmured he whom we have known as Ebony Dan.

"Oh Edward! can this be real?" The lovely girl glanced around until her eyes rested upon the pale features of the prostrate man. Uttering a low cry she sprang to his side and knelt down.

"Father! father! speak to me!" she cried.

"Hush! I am dying," murmured Mason, feebly, "listen to me—everybody. I stained these hands in blood—the blood of a brother. Bolton has spoken truly—Edward Carson is an innocent man—Eleanor—you are—not—my child. You are the daughter of the brother whom I slew. My fortune—is yours—Edward, watch over and care for her—forgive me—if you can and—"

The sentence was not concluded for the eyes closed and the spirit of the fratricide was ushered into the presence of its Maker.

The mine-owner had burst a blood-vessel in the frenzy that followed the exposure of the crime he had committed. Even as the guilty man's spirit passed into the unknown world the group were startled by the sharp crack of a pistol in their midst and a bullet whizzed past Ebony Dan's head.

It was Bolton who had discharged the weapon, and not waiting to see the effect of the shot the rascal placed the revolver to his temple and again fired.

He fell forward with the rope still fastened about his neck.

The blood-stained wretch had cheated the Vigilantes, and died by his own hand! Both the murderer and his accomplice were ushered into the presence of their Maker to stand before that awful tribunal and answer for their joint crime.

It is fitting that our story should end where first the reader obtained a glimpse of the characters who have figured in the narrative.

The sheriff was the first to break the silence. He stepped forward and extended his hand to our hero.

"Ebony Dan, or rather, Edward Carson, accept my thanks for saving the lives of these men and myself. The manner in which you and your riders dispersed Bolton's gang of cut-throats convinces me that, although you have been hunted like a wild beast and you have doubtless transgressed the laws, you are not as black as you have been painted."

"As black as I am painted sounds very well in my case for burnt cork certainly covered features that dared not be exposed while Edward Carson was an outlaw. This much I will say in defense of my many lawless acts: I have never shed the blood of man wantonly, and the escort can testify that I have saved them from Bolton's marauders when death seemed inevitable. My good deeds should be arrayed against my bad ones, and as the old saying goes—give a man credit for what good he has accomplished."

"Men! You hear what he has to say. The verdict lies in your hands; shall it be? Shall we forgive Ebony Dan?" asked the sheriff.

"Yes!" shouted the Vigilantes, "and we'll use our influence to set him right before the people of Silver Circle."

"What of your mystic riders?" asked the sheriff.

"Their mission is at an end. Like me their faces are white, although burnt cork served us well as a mask. Who they are, what they are, or where they find a lurking-place, I do not choose to reveal. Of one thing you can be certain, however—Ebony Dan and his black riders will never be seen again. Bolton's band

destroyed, and Edward Carson once more a free man, the black horsemen disappear and leave no trace. We may meet them face to face in the crowded streets of Silver Circle—even grasp their hands, yet you will never know that once they followed the fortunes of Ebony Dan and masqueraded as the black riders of Hell Gate?"

Carson paused a few moments and then added—"The treasure-chests which I recovered from Bolton's bandits are all safe and intact. They shall be delivered into the hands of the Express agents. You see I am not guilty of robbery!"

"Ebony Dan" was as good as his word, and the treasure found its way into the hands of the owners.

"Are you happy, Eleanor?" demanded the lover as the couple rode side by side toward the mining-town.

"Quite happy, my darling," was the confession.

And now the concluding words that will bring our story to an end. Eleanor Mason obtained all the property and wealth that were hers rightfully. Ebony Dan, as we must still call him, was the lion of the hour, and he is to-day an influential citizen in the town that once banished him and set a price upon his head. The rival leagues never infested the trail again and "Ebony Dan," is mentioned as the destroyer of the infamous banditti.

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